Politicians should show respect for the Earth: Albertans and their government ignore the threat of global warming at their -- and the environment's -- peril, warns Fred Henry, Roman Catholic Bishop of Calgary.

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In 1992 the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a declaration with over 1,575 signatures declaring that human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Many of our current practices put at serious risk the future we wish for human society and the planet and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know.

At last December's Kyoto conference on climate change, Canada and 159 other countries took a giant step forward as they recognized that our earth is straining under the demands and waste of human society, and accordingly, Canada agreed to cut its greenhouse emissions level by six per cent from 1990 levels by 2010.

However, there is strong evidence that we're beginning to backtrack as many of our politicians just don't get it! Today's mainstream economic model which views development as never-ending, continues to ignore the fact that our earth is a finite community. Consequently, the needs of the market and of business take precedence over the needs of the earth and its inhabitants. At the western premiers conference in Yellowknife, Premier Ralph Klein said: "Certainly the position as it now stands to reduce by six per cent 1990 levels by the year 2010 is unacceptable and we think would have dire economic consequences for the province of Alberta."

The treasurer of the province wasn't far behind: "Those percentages would simply be devastating to us economically and would have no appreciative positive effect on the environment any way." Apparently this wasn't a slip of the tongue; the premier repeated the message at a meeting of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

The negative results of development, such as pollution, resource depletion and the loss of species, are not taken into account in economic calculations. Too bad for all of us, as the earth deficit, the closing down of the basic life system of the planet through abuse of the air, the soil, the water and the vegetation is not only a resource deficit, but the death of the living process.

Human society, in its over-use of fossil fuels and depletion of forests, is altering the atmosphere to the point that our climate is changing. Already we are experiencing unusual weather patterns and more flooding. As climate change accelerates in the next 100 years, the earth's mean temperature will rise by approximately 3 degrees to 5 degrees C -- more change than the planet has experienced in the past 10,000 years. Canadian are among the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases in the world; every year, we emit 21 tonnes of greenhouse gas per person, while people in developing countries emit about 1.85 tonnes per person.

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Ecological destruction is accelerating, and species are disappearing at a rate 10,000 times faster than before the appearance of human beings. By failing to respect the earth, we are threatening our own existence. By treating the earth and its resources as commodities, we forget that humans are only one part of the web of life God has created. We forget that the earth does not belong to humanity, much less to a small minority of it. Rather, we belong to the earth.

In 1854 the Squamish Chief Seattle reflected an attitude of reverence for the earth that we would do well to emulate today. "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? This we know. The earth does not belong to the human; humans belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. The humans did not weave the web of life; they are merely strand in it. Whatever they do to the web, they do to themselves. . . . This earth is precious to God, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator."

Reverential care for the earth, not exploitation should be the mandate. God has not given us despotism but stewardship. And a steward is one who manages what is someone else's. A steward cares, is concerned, agonizes. Stewards may not plunder or waste; they are responsible, can be called to account for their stewardship. "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it." (Psalms 24:1)

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